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## Icefield

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### Abstract

Guy was speaking with the slaughterman, Mr Dunnett, whose habit of planting a bloodied hand on a hip had sheened his pocket satiny brown. On one of his rabbiting forays along creekbank warrens, the old fellow had caught a kingfisher in a net and caged it in his fernhouse. Brilliant colours whirled and fluttered in a wire cocoon.

GEOFF WYATT

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## 1

Guy was speaking with the slaughterman, Mr Dunnett, whose habit of planting a bloodied hand on a hip had sheened his pocket satiny brown. On one of his rabbiting forays along creekbank warrens, the old fellow had caught a kingfisher in a net and caged it in his fernhouse. Brilliant colours whirled and fluttered in a wire cocoon.

'He'll die', Guy warned.

'No 'e won't', Mr Dunnett promised around his pipestem, which now and then offered up an Indian smoke signal, past whiskered cheeks and sunburned bony nose, to hatbrim's edge. 'I'll see to that.'

Every so often the bird stilled and hung sideways.

'He's so hurt. He'll die.'

"Urt? I never 'urt 'im. I jis' put the net over 'is 'ole in the tree, like so, see? When 'e got caught I put me 'ands around him, just like this. What would a little codger like you know about birds?'

When, later, Guy stole into Mr Dunnett's fernery to release the kingfisher, he found it dead. He took from the floor feathers that must have burst in frenzy, and planted them, quills-down, in his mother's vegetable garden.

'Little *duine*!' Granny Sutherland cried when she found them. 'They won't grow. They *can't* grow.'

'Hollyhocks do.'

'But they're not the same.'

'How d'you know?'

'Dear little *duine*', Old Iseabel said, a joint creaking as she got down on her knees to explain. 'Hollyhocks grow from seeds. Birds hatch from eggs.'

'I didn't want him to die. I wanted him to go back to the creek.'

## 2

While he waited for school to happen, he spent much of his time at the clay bank, scooping out the purest chunks where Main Street had been cut level. These he softened with water sufficiently to shape and mould unrecognisable aspects of what he thought the secret could yield. Then he

would leave them on a board to dry in the sun. Once, Granny Sutherland, his father's mother, sought to encourage him from formless creation: 'Make me a bowl, little *duine*.' She pronounced it 'doon-nah'.

'I can't see anything in bowls.'

Mistaking his meaning, the old woman laughed, and soon lapsed in memory:

'There was a glass-blowing Sutherland as married a Sinclair widow on Thurso. Then there was another settled on Harris, and another, Long Seamus, as gave up the craft and sailed away to Stornoway among those *sabaideach* McLeods of Lewis – all over a Munro *slaodaire*. Long Seamus died of the drink and a broken heart the year we left Gualainn and walked down to Fort William on Loch Linnhe to sail to the colony. He should have stuck with *cinneadh* ...'

Granny Sutherland, or Old Iseabel, as she was called, meandered on, forgetting, in words welling up from childhood lived at the top of Scotland, the point at which she had abandoned the present. Yet for her grandson the confluence of languages was pure music. He did not try to understand what he instinctively knew to be a river of humorous slander and insult, the bed of which was reefed in unyielding clan-stones. As she had said many times, once the Gaelic took lodging in the mouth it could never be evicted, not even after you'd forgotten it was there.

'... that Munro *botramaid* was borned in a Cromarty *taigh-spadaith*,' Granny venomously advised over the rim of her teacup. 'It was *caoidhearan*, *caoidhearan*, *caoidhearan*, my little *duine*, until she died of the snivels, the Cromarty *dubhchaile* ...'

The river ran, the boy dreamed visions of Thursos and Stornoways, Uists, Hebrides and Skyes, *botramaid*s, *dubhchaile*s, and *Macdiolain*s, and of blowships that *ghabh* the Highlanders to the Colony. Or he would compare the Lewis of his Gaelic history with that of his Anglo-Saxon at Lewes. To those unimaginable lands, accessible only in his mother's atlas, he would one day journey.

Occasionally Old Iseabel would blink and ask:

'Did you hear that, little *duine*? I said *broinegs*! That's all they ever wore all their rinabout days. *Broinegs*, and the *bochdan* they stole from the *fuigleach* in the fields.'

3

He was four years old, in that summer preceding his first year at school, and standing at the bush end of Main Street where the mountain seemed to begin.

Ever since he could remember, in a wicker basket on the veranda of their home, the tree-blued mountain had filled, dominated his imagination. It was more than a mountain, or upthrust along the Great Dividing Range;

but what it was additionally he could not begin to suppose. He wished to create a track through the trees in order to reach the mountaintop and so determine for himself what it was that suggested more; but the only way that tracks were formed was by the passing over of many feet, or of vehicles, constantly. This would not do, since he wanted his own personal track to the mountain's secret.

Then he thought that if he dragged a log behind him, the work of many feet over a long time would quickly be done, pushing leaves, bark, and sticks aside, biting out a furrow that would not quickly be filled in again. The problem, though, was that he was not yet big or strong enough to lift such a log, let alone drag it up the mountain. Of course, if he started at the top and dragged a manageable limb down, it would be easier. Yet, he reasoned, how would he find his way, among all those trees, rocks, and scrub, to the top, if no path existed? True, there was a road that began somewhere beyond the cemetery and disappeared into the first rise; but he didn't want to use that: it wouldn't lead to where he wanted to go.

He took up a long dry stick that had fallen from a stringybark and trailed it some way under the trees. He paused by a torn stump and saw that the result was far from satisfactory: in some places it had barely disturbed the leaves. He remained there, considering the problem, until the steam train leaving Willowhill to the north sent down over this part of the world its long wilderness cry.

## 4

His mother, dusting flour from her forearms, was part of the mountain. She had fed, filled, dominated his imagination since forever, in exactly the same unfathomable way.

'How do you make tracks?'

There was flour on her nose and a bold white finger-brand on her shining hair. He looked for the corresponding smudge on a knuckle. His own nose felt itchy. Her hair he compared with the roan richness of time-ripened acorns: darker than chestnut, yet lighter than her mahogany-tabled sewing machine.

'Have you been to the end of Main Street again?'

He came to her and stood against her thigh, smelling the flour on her hand as she collared his yearning neck.

'You have to be patient,' she said.

## 5

When Guy was older, and knew what many Gaelic words meant, he thought to ask:

'Why do you enjoy hating them when they're dead?'

'Little *duine*', she archly said. 'I'm going to meet them one day, aren't I now? I must keep up the practice so I can tell them guuuuid what I think of them.'

If her great age had drained her hair of colour, leaving it wrapped in white crinkled wings about her head, all of the life force had been concentrated in those glittering blue-grey eyes, fierce and imperious as an eagle's. In her, Guy early knew, resided a Gaelic spirit vastly different from, and more acrid than, that of the Anglo-Saxon. The school larrikin Ray Watson had kicked her once, only to see erupt an old she-devil who snatched up her dogwood walking stick and beat him, head and shoulders, out of the yard and up Main Street, he bawling, and she screaming Gaelic imprecations that sounded as shocking as gunfire along somnolent Main Street:

'*Burraidh! ... Slaiorghaire! ... Neach diolain!*'

The pounding ended only when she ran out of breath at the railway paddock, from which fence Guy's mother unclutched an old claw and led her home, amid approving shoppers, to a nip of whisky.

Later, Guy asked:

'What does *neach diolain* mean?'

Granny gave him the sweetest of smiles.

'Bastard.'

## 6

Sometimes he would find his mother by the stove, her forehead pressed against the lintel bricks and staring at the chimneyback where glass panes had been smoked brown, suffusing the polished steel kettle with the same light that glowed through dark honey.

'What can you see?'

A reflective hand might rise to his shoulder.

'I'm not looking out.'

He wondered whether she might be thinking of his father.

## 7

In time, as he read, during his school years and after, Guy came to think of himself as having two distinct British heritages, the one raw and Gaelic; the other, softer Anglo-Saxon. He believed that his own secret convictions about things – what lay behind spoken words, a glance, a sunrise, the unfolding in his mother's garden of a rose in which a pearl of rain was held – were sourced in his Sutherland being, in the kind of wild and solitary poetry that Old Iseabel's monologues provoked in him. Hers was another world, mythic, harsh, stony, on the violent seashore, amid endless rain and half-seen shrieking gulls.

Old Iseabel remembered the turf house on Gualainn's steep hill, the black cattle in winter housed at one end, and the peatsmoke that dyed the human spirit as it did the flesh of herrings. And in that dripping turf house, she told Guy, in the depths of the coldest winter anyone in the whole of Sutherland and Caithness could remember, and to which her old father, Niall Mackay, succumbed, there had been born to her sister such a howling screeching baby as had to have his mouth stopped up with rags and a cow-rope wound about his head.

'She was chased by a mad horse when she was carrying him,' the grandmother explained.

These stories, told before the fire during Meteora's own long winter nights, created in Guy's mind visionary pictures so vivid as sometimes to leave him to wonder whether he had not himself been born in Granny Sutherland's century. He dreamed of growing up quickly and journeying to Gualainn, the fishing village on the high brae-shoulder staring north into the ocean, to visit his clansmen who, he was certain, were all giants of men with lopsided bony faces. They would welcome him with sardonic clan-love and gruff, grim humour.

As he grew older, and read of the great Celtic migrations from the shores of the Adriatic westward into Europe, north across the channel and seeking out the wildest and least hospitable of landscapes in what would come to be known as the British Isles, Guy began to understand how such turbulent human spirit could be dyed both by those epic wanderings and the wilderness sanctuaries high up the hardest mountain straths and glens.

He could never afterwards hear the bagpipes' sudden rant without feeling delirious wayward love for this unpruned branch of his family tree. In those reckless skirling notes he heard an ancient voice proclaiming the savage pride of being, among eagles and peathags, where no other race or tribe would dream of isolating itself, let alone of enduring such long, silent, snowbound winters.

As he dreamed, a vast hunger for sea-voyaging, upon the wildernesses of water he had seen in picture books, entered his being.

There had been kinder seasons, however brief or bittersweet. Holding her tartan shawl for inspection, Old Iseabel described how in spring she, her mother and her sisters would scour the braes for lichen, *crotal geal*, to dry and mix with blaeberry, or *lus na dearc gorma*, for the extracting of purple dye. In her eighties, she still remembered the secret proportions of alder bark, dockroot, oak bark and acorns, mixed to yield black; and of privet berries, teasel, iris leaf, wild mignonette, furze bark, and heather, to give green, as well, to this most beautiful and sombre of Highland tartan weaves.

Sometimes she would sing, in a high, high voice in Gaelic, the haunting *Iseabel nic Aoidh*, the clan salute to her great namesake; or the infinitely sad *Cumha Dhomnuill Mhic Aoidh*, lament for Donald Mackay, first Lord of Reay; and afterwards bring forth from memory the clan bards' stories of the Mackay fortunes beginning in the thirteenth century.

Or she would tell him of the *seanachie*, poet and historian, whose function it was to record in memory the clan's unwritten history and genealogy from the beginning, and so pass it down to each oncoming generation.

She spoke from the distance of time, like cattle calling from a hillside, a lowing which could be confused with human complaint. In the same way, the rooster's faraway cry reminded the boy of an infant waking from sleep. On such nights Old Iseabel seemed to Guy to express a poignant state of exile from which no escape was possible except in memory. Her sadness, never broached in direct conversation, embraced her son, Guy's father, Will Sutherland, absent at war, which to her was the historic fate of her dismembered and dispersed clanship; and was perhaps why she unconsciously poured her great arch love on her grandson, her little *dounie* in whom the blood still ran. It was as though the boy might interrupt the circle of exile that gripped the century in which they were held, and step through a door of reality into a magical past where Old Iseabel's dreaming began, where the *piob Gaelach's* shriek roused the blood quicker than ever could the water of life, and where a little girl wrapped in plaid forever skipped through the heather.